

## The Lessons of the Past

Remarks at the annual Labor Day Breakfast, September 3, 2011, sponsored by the North Central Florida Central Labor Council, Gainesville.

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AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka has recently said that “nostalgia for organized labor’s past is no strategy for our future.”

As a historian, however, I do think that the past can continue to instruct us.

Let me bring you back to the year 1935 and the founding of the CIO, or Congress of Industrial Organizations. The CIO existed as a separate organization between that year and 1955 when it merged with the AFL to form the AFL-CIO. Many historians see the formation and struggles of the CIO to build industrial unions as the single most important episode in the history of American labor.

Much has changed since the 1930s. Then the “typical” worker dug coal, poured steel, or assembled automobiles. Today she is a health care worker, a retail clerk, a school teacher.

But there’s an old saying that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Billy Bragg bids us to remember “the lessons of the past.” What are the lessons that the rise of the CIO holds for us?

I’ve written a 400 pp. book about the history of the CIO—available in quality book stores nowhere. In view of the shortness of time available for us today, however, I’ve boiled what I’ve learned down to four words.

# Fight

# Unite

# Connect

# Vote

**The CIO was a fighting organization.** It took the struggles of the sit-down strikers, picket line walkers, wildcaters, and police-defying militants to bring such powerful corporations as General Motors and U.S. Steel to the bargaining table. As singer Pete Seeger, in “Talking Union,” reminds us, “If you wait for the boss to raise your pay/ You’ll be waitin’ till judgment day.” The methods of union busters have changed since the 1930s but the need for workers to fight for their rights remains central, as the Verizon workers and the folks in Wisconsin have recently taught us.

**The CIO united workers across ethnic, racial, religions, and skill boundaries.** Prior to the CIO, organized labor’s record with respect to African Americans, immigrants, and people of Asian descent; and in organizing women and the unskilled was a dismal one. It was only by organizing black workers on the kill floor of the meatpacking plants that the CIO was able to build a packinghouse workers’ union; only by bringing workers of diverse skill levels and ethnic backgrounds into common cause that unions could be built in the industrial heart of the economy. Today right wingers invite us to pit immigrant workers against native-born workers

and workers in private employment against public workers. The CIO wasn't built by caving in to such divisions nor will labor be revived today if workers succumb to ethnophobia and to attacks on our brothers and sisters who work as teachers, firefighters, and public healthcare providers.

**The CIO connected with the progressive community, religious and secular.** It reached out to allies in the churches, radical movements, and civil rights organizations such as the NAACP. These allies provided key support for union struggles. Today's labor movement must continue its efforts to connect with progressives in the community—women and men of faith; environmentalists; feminists; civil rights activists; civil libertarians; human rights advocates. And—equally important—our allies in the community must come to the support of the embattled labor movement. Let us never forget that labor rights are HUMAN rights; and the labor movement is a crucial component, under siege as we speak, of the progressive community. Indeed, in many ways it is the last line of defense against the triumph of the corporatist, right wing agenda.

**Vote.** The CIO pioneered in creating the original political action committee. Under the leadership of Sidney Hillman and Walter Reuther, the CIO and its affiliated unions, notably the UAW, stressed the centrality of the political process in the struggle to raise standards. True, it does too often seem that although “labor does the heavy lifting,” it quickly becomes “the caboose at the end of the train” when those whom it supported gain office. Even so, the need for labor, in alliance with other progressive elements, to mobilize its members and reach out to working

people in the political process has been powerfully demonstrated—positively in 2006 and 2008, negatively in 2010.

So: a formula for revivifying a beleaguered labor movement, as the CIO sparked the labor resurgence of the 1930s and 1940s: FIGHT; UNITE; CONNECT; VOTE.

In closing, I'm tempted to end with Dr. King. Despite the Koch Brothers and Fox News, in defiance of the union busters and Tea Party, his powerful words continue to give courage: "The Arc of the Universe bends slow," he assured us, "but it bends toward Justice." But I think instead I'll end with a voice from the CIO era: Back in 1941, Pete Seeger had this advice to workers in the auto plants, shipyards, and steel mills: "Take it easy," he counseled—"but take it."

Thank you.